

Remarks to General Services Administration Employees in Franconia,
Virginia
September 8, 1993

Thank you very much. Mr. Vice President, Roger, Senator Robb and Congressman Moran, Congresswoman Byrne, and, most important, to all of you who have worked so hard here at this center to give the American people the Government they deserve. I want to begin by once again thanking the Vice President for the incredible amount of work that was done by the Vice President, by his staff, by hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, and by people like you who gave us the ideas that went into the National Performance Review report.

I also want to say to all of you something that you all know, because you are both public employees and private citizens. If we can reform these procurement practices, we can probably do more there than in any other area of our national life in the short run to restore the confidence of the American people in their Government. Every taxpaying citizen who goes out in the summertime has bought insect repellant, and no rational person could possibly believe that Federal employees need specially designed insect repellant. Everybody's bought aspirin. Everybody's filled out a form they wished they hadn't filled out. Everybody's bought things like folders and computer tapes. And at a time when we are now 20 years, 20 years into a period in our history where most American wage earners are working longer work weeks for stagnant wages, it is outrageous for the Government to have rules and regulations which take those people's money from them and spend it on things that cannot be justified.

You heard the Vice President say some of these things. But our Government employs 142,000 people in the procurement system alone. We know we have 900 detailed procurement laws, and we're going to ask the Congress to change a lot of that. I've asked myself many times, as I've heard these stories from coast to coast, how this occurred. And I think there are many reasons.

I was out the other day in a particularly wrenching encounter in Alameda, California, at the naval station there, which is one of the military facilities that's going to be closed in the base closings. And I talked to this man who

had been an enlisted person in the Navy for 19 years, raised a family as a Navy enlisted person. He said, "Look, I hope I can stay. But," he said, "I'll tell you one thing. I just tried to buy a personal computer for our operations." And he said, "Thank the Lord we had some sort of waiver, because," he said, "under the rules and regulations, I was going to have to spend \$4,500 on a computer that had half of the capacity that I got for \$2,200 at the local store where people buy their computers." And he said, "You know, if you're going to ask people like me to leave the armed services because we have to cut back the defense budget, people who are willing to serve and willing to put their lives on the line, it is wrong to do that and keep spending twice as much for computers with half the capacity." The American people know this.

I think there are a lot of reasons why this happens over time. Number one, Government rule writers never made a distinction between a very specialized product that was made only for the Government, like a bomber, for example, and insect repellant. You have to have rules for both. Number two, the distribution system in America has changed dramatically so that ordinary Americans can now access economies of scale because of discount distribution centers for items small- and medium-sized. That was not true 10 years ago. Number three, there's no way rulemaking can keep up with technology cycles. The Vice President mentioned that as it relates to computers.

And finally—and this is the most important thing of all, I think, because this pervades everything we're trying to do—we spend too much time in Government, in my judgment, trying to keep bad things from happening with rules and regulations that eventually prohibit sensible public employees from making good things happen. If you spend all your time trying to keep something bad from happening—[*applause*]—now, I want to make it clear what we're talking about here. I'm not talking about a system with no accountability. I'm not talking about what happens when we change all the financial rules affecting S&L's and then had no accountability,

so we got what was predictable. There was a middle ground. We didn't have to overregulate them to death. We don't want to overlearn the lessons of that. We're not talking about what happened in the scandals in the Housing and Urban Development Department where there was no oversight and accountability of what was actually being done, but that is different from trying to micromanage and superregulate every decision that you and every other public employee makes before he or she makes it.

And one of the things that I hope very much that the Vice President and I will be able to communicate through the national media to the American people is that we're going to have to give our public employees some more elbow room to make sensible decisions to save people money and yet hold them accountable so that if errors are made, they're pointed out; if somebody does something dishonest, it's found out. But we are now paying far more for the system of protecting ourselves from things than we ever would by the occasional mistake that will be made by an honest, creative public employee.

There are all kinds of accountability systems that can be built in out there that still don't strangle people when they go to work every day. That is what we are committed to. I think it will make it more fun to work for the Federal Government. I think it will be more exciting for people to get up and go to work every day knowing that they have the capacity to treat the dollars within their control, given to them by hardworking taxpayers, the same way the taxpayers would their own money in their own purchases in their own homes and businesses. That is our objective, and we are determined to achieve it.

The other thing I want to say to you is that this rulemaking problem is not just a problem in procurement. For example, you know that diabetics can have trouble with circulation and sometimes that can result in an amputation of the limb. It's shocking, but a veteran with diabetes in some cases can't qualify for a special shoe that would help the circulation and maybe even save his foot from an amputation, but he would qualify for an artificial limb and, by the way, the cost of the surgery. Now, which costs more? What makes more sense? Nobody ever did this on purpose. But the failure to analyze this, the fact that our Government has basically been unexamined for so long, has led to thousands and thousands of examples which cannot

be defended. We just want to make sense out of this. We want to modernize this system so that you can take advantage of the best products, the best technology, the best pricing. We want you to be able to decide to buy Off so you won't go buggy when you need insect repellent. [Laughter]

I also want to say that I'm very grateful to those of you who helped us get this far, and I'd like to ask you to help us one more step. In the appropriate way, Mr. Johnson will be testifying before committees of Congress. But I think, as citizens, anything any of you can do, just write and say, "Look, this is our life. We know how this works. And we want to change it. And we can be trusted to make a lot of these decisions. And there are also easily establishable accountability systems so that if we make a mistake it can be corrected."

When I was in the campaign last year, I often quoted a line my wife read to me from a psychology book, which is that insanity was doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting a different result. [Laughter] Well, we're trying to stop doing the same thing over and over again. We believe we can do better by our people. We believe we can do better by our public employees. Our responsibility, I know, is to take the knowledge that you have given to the Vice President and to the National Performance Review and change the way Government works. In the process, change the way we spend the taxpayers' money and change the way we impact on people.

I will end where I began. The central tenet of every democracy in the end is trust. It's trust. When people elect Members of Congress and Presidents and empower them to establish institutions like the GSA, what they are basically saying is, "There is no way in the world I can do all this for myself, and I certainly can't make all these decisions. So just for the privilege of having a check at election time, I trust you to make these decisions in the meanwhile."

That's what this is all about. And I've said more and more, we have all kinds of deficits in our country. We've got a budget deficit; we've got an investment deficit; we have a performance deficit, and that has led to a trust deficit. The profound sense of alienation so many people feel in our country has got to be healed, because we've got to do a lot of things to get America into the 21st century, to restore a sense of opportunity, to be able to create jobs, and

to be able to support incomes again that justify the hard work people do. And that no society will be able to do it unless there is a real partnership between Government and people in their private lives. And a partnership, whether it's a marriage, a business, or a Government-private partnership, requires trust.

So in the end, this is about more than dollars, it's about more than the pain of filling out those forms. It's even about more than making you happier and more productive on the job. It is about whether together we can restore the trust of the American people in their Government so that we can move on to these large tasks that we have to embrace to make the changes that are going on in the world friendly rather than dangerous for the American people.

I do not think you can underestimate the importance of the work that you and I are engaged in. Because if we can reestablish that trust, we can regenerate opportunity, we can restore a sense of community in this country, we can make other people willing to take responsibility for their own actions because we are doing it, and we are setting an example. This is a big, big thing. We must do it together. And I thank you for your contribution to this important effort.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 9:30 a.m. at the GSA Franconia Distribution Center. In his remarks, he referred to Roger W. Johnson, Administrator, General Services Administration.

Exchange With Reporters Prior to a Meeting With Congressional Leaders September 8, 1993

The President. Let me say, first of all, I'm delighted to have the Congressional leadership here today. And we're going to begin our conversations by talking about the reinventing Government initiative. The Vice President's going to give the leadership a briefing. And I'm very much looking forward to this new phase of the congressional session and of a bipartisan effort on a lot of issues. And I hope we will center it on this, because I think this effort can do as much as anything else to build the trust of the American people and what we're doing on a whole range of other issues.

Q. Mr. President, on health care, some of the people who have briefed, Democrats and Republicans, believe that the Medicaid and Medicare cuts are too large, too politically difficult, and too nonspecific. Can you reassure them?

The President. At the appropriate time.

Q. There is some concern, sir—

Q. What about the chance that the health care, though—do you think that you can handle all of these things, reinvent Government, trade?

The President. Absolutely. I don't think we have an option because I think the country can't walk away from this problem. But I think we should begin with this because this is something that will unify Americans and will unify the Congress and will prove that we can spend the money we have in appropriate ways and stop wasting so much of it.

Q. What will be the chances of bipartisanship on some of these issues, like health care?

The President. Good.

Q. Why so, given the experience you had in the first part of this administration?

The President. These are different issues with different constituencies, and they can be presented in a different way. I think the chances are really good.

NOTE: The exchange began at 11:16 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.